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Commonalities connecting biraciality and bisexuality : building integrated support in the college environment

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to develop a better understanding of biracial and bisexual identity development; (2) to determine developmental similarities between biracial and bisexual college students; and 3) to provide implications for student affairs practitioners.

COMMONALITIES CONNECTING BIRACIALITY AND BISEXUALITY:
BUILDING INTEGRATED SUPPORT IN THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

A Research Paper

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Although several theories of racial and sexual identity development of college students have been extensively examined (e.g., African-American , White, Gays, Lesbians), theories on biracial and bisexual identity development, have received much less attention. McEwen (1996) points out most of the literature on sexual identity is focused on the development of gay men and lesbians and little on bisexuals. The literature on racial identity development is focused lately on specific races and ethnic groups while identity development of biracials has been virtually ignored. Moreover, relatively little research has been done comparing the development of racial and sexual identity groups.

Are there similarities between biracial and bisexual college students? If so, would making connections be useful in supporting the needs of biracial and bisexual college students? Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993) acknowledged that biracials share a common racial heritage with two or more racial groups, but may not identify with one racial group. Likewise, bisexuals may not identify with gays or lesbians. Zinik (1985) defined bisexuality as “an integration of homosexual and heterosexual identities” (p. 9). Since lack of identity may be a common element, could it be then that these groups share a common experience in regard to their psychosocial development? What knowledge and skills would be needed by student affairs professionals to offer support to these populations?

Biracial and bisexual students are found on virtually every college campus. Consequently, it may prove appropriate and useful to examine meaningful similarities and differences between models of biracial and bisexual students. Since serving the students and student-centeredness are the primary goals of student affairs professionals, knowing and understanding college students of all types is of utmost importance. Additionally, it's important to understand the development and needs of biracial and bisexual college

students in order to design appropriate supportive environments. Using models is one way to identify similar characteristics between the two populations. Therefore, to determine if similar patterns would emerge and to address the questions raised, a review of the literature was undertaken.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) to develop a better understanding of biracial and bisexual identity development, (2) to determine developmental similarities between biracial and bisexual college students, and 3) to provide implications for student affairs practitioners.

Review of the Literature

In this paper, three common elements are discussed in comparing biracial and bisexual college students. The patterns that evolved are not limited to, but included such similarities as the lack of representation of biracials and bisexuals, their need to be a part of a community, and their living in and with ambiguity. The examination of two identity models are compared as well to identify common developmental stages between the two populations.

Lack of Representation

The research indicates that bisexual students are underrepresented at college universities while biracial students may often go unnoticed and may be underrepresented as well. Homosexuality support groups may be visible on campuses, but ironically, bisexual students may be often overlooked because of their developmental differences. Rust (1992) revealed that visibility is an important issue. One complaint frequently voiced by bisexuals is that "heterosexuality and homosexuality are visible while bisexuality is not" (p. 304). McEwen (1996) pointed out that little has been written about bisexuality, and

even less research on bisexuality has been conducted. Beyond being aware of the culture, it was important to maintain the visibility of the issue of sexual orientation on campus (Love, 1998). Invisibility is but one of the obstacles students have to overcome (Love, 1998). Individuals also are faced with oppressive, unsupportive, homophobic cultures in which they are made to feel invisible and isolated (Love 1998).

Biracial people, of course, attend colleges, but according to McEwen (1996) "these people [biracial people] may not identify with a single racial group" (p. 197). McEwen (1996) also pointed out that "the racial identity of mixed persons has likewise been ignored" (p. 194). Any misunderstandings or ignorance of college faculty and staff may often deny or hinder biracial students' abilities to succeed in college. Biracial and bisexual students may also not get the support needed to develop their identity because of not being represented or noticed in college environments and curriculum. Funderburg (1994) noted that biracial people are virtually invisible in the curriculum. She further stated "the absence of material that represents or includes people with background like theirs is so prevalent that many biracial people have never thought to consider the possibility of inclusion" (p. 108). The U. S. Census still does not permit multiracials to identify themselves. Many colleges have a box marked "other" to include a category for multiracial students. A lack of appropriate categories reveals how the biracial population has generally been ignored (Poston, 1990).

The Need for Community

Bisexuals and biracials have been calling for more inclusion in community groups and acceptance from society. Poston (1990) noted that biracial individuals often experience guilt, self-hatred, and lack of acceptance from one or more groups. Being bisexual often

means not being accepted into any community. Weise (1992), in discussing the need for inclusion, revealed that bisexual groups across the country have called for more inclusion of bisexuals in lesbian and gay communities. She described the invisibility by affirming that bisexuals are a part of and active in communities, but are not recognized by others. McKeon (1992) further revealed this feeling of community isolation by expressing the idea of "drifting between communities...neither of which is really home" (p. 27). Furthermore, Kich (1992) observed that "the preservation of the sense of a biracial and bicultural identity of being 'both' and 'neither' throughout life is marked by ongoing integration of different and sometimes contradictory heritages, histories, and parental, social, and community messages" (p. 317). Bennett (1992) summarized the struggle as: "I'm simply trying to live a both/and life in an either/or world" (p. 205).

Building community is an important dimension to developing an inclusive and affirmative environment. As McKeon (1992) stated, "I believe there is also a time and place for alliances and coalition, and I hope ...all backgrounds will be welcome in them. In this spirit, we move toward a better world for all of us" (p. 33). Tierney (1993) contended that cultural resistance and change must address the underlying power and influence of cultural structures. Additionally, as Tierney (1993) recommended, the cultural structures and power relationships also had to be brought to conscious awareness by those seeking to change the culture. By recognizing a need for inclusion, he has suggested a focus on creating communities of difference where those attributes that make us unique and distinct as individuals and groups are celebrated and are a source of mutual learning. Weise (1992) described this as creating a place to call home.

Ambiguous Identities

Another similarity involves possible dual conflicts among both groups. Brown (1989) observed that biculturalism: required “juggling, balance, and living in and with ambiguity; marginality, with its perspective that is both outside and within the mainstream” (p. 452). Defining oneself as bisexual has often meant facing inner turmoil between the heterosexual community and the homosexual community. In Zinik’s flexibility model of bisexuality, bisexuals are portrayed as “somewhat chameleon, capable of moving easily between the heterosexual and homosexual worlds” (p. 9). “Bisexuality falls in the middle, not pure anything, incomplete, a mixture. ‘Bi’ is two, implying a split, two parts and no whole” (Gibian, 1992, p. 3). Sexuality, as described by Weise (1992), means confronting culturally prescribed notions of duality and conflict. Being bisexual means to live an intensely examined life of “What are you?.” Choe (1992) described being bisexual requires one to divide a whole identity into tidy slices. Being pulled into two directions is constant. Not being one or the other encourages being overlooked. Self-identity often does not match the perception of society. For instance, Gibian (1992) found there was a dissatisfaction of names to describe self, lack of adequate labels, and being seen as a “fence-sitter.”

Bisexuals and biracials have worked to revise predetermined social identities, but are not always heard. Choe (1992) pointed out, “we are rejecting the rule set out for us, the rule that says, ‘Choose only one.’ We are redefining the world and demanding to be accepted on our own terms” (p. 17). A student from Brown who was bothered by the terminology that is sometimes used to describe a multiracial individual, will say, “Oh, she’s part this and part that.” She responded by saying, “No, I’m not a collection of parts

pasted together as you would like to describe me” (Brooks, 1998). Poston (1990) noted that many biracial people believe that society forced or pushed them to make a specific racial choice in order to participate or belong to peer, family, and/or social groups. Despite this, biracial and bisexual individuals have worked to be recognized in their developmental journey of “being caught in the middle.”

Biracial and Bisexual Identity Developments

When applying theory, one must be aware of the challenges when considering and examining theory. Theory is a complex integration of meanings and is not absolute. There is a constant need to reflect, question, and conceptualize the complexities of identity theories. Being aware of these challenges is vital when examining models and applying them to individuals. Nevertheless, identity development models play an important role in better understanding what individuals may be experiencing as they move through different phases of their lives. In comparing the biracial and bisexual identity, Kich’s (1982) Biracial, Bicultural Identity Development model, as explained in Root’s (1992) book on racially mixed people, and the Bisexual Development Model of Pryor, Weinberg, and Williams (1994) were examined.

According to Kich (1982), there are three major stages in the development and continuing resolution of biracial identity:

Stage 1: *Awareness of Differentness and Dissonance.* This stage is described as an initial awareness of differentness and dissonance between self-perceptions and others’ perceptions on them. Biracial people often find themselves being treated by others as different based upon appearance, name, birthplace, parents’ race/ethnicity and this leads to having dissonance in images of one’s self. The question, “What are you?”, based upon one’s perceived physical racial/ethnic ambiguity, underscores the experience of being biracial.

Stage 2: *Struggle for Acceptance*. As part of this second stage, biracial people search for acceptance and understanding from others as a way of understanding themselves. They struggle for belonging as a way to reduce feelings of dissonance. "Passing" is taken on as a means of escaping devalued dimensions of self. Biracial people begin to explore parents' heritages (usually that of the minority group) and explore resources for biracial people. They learn and use specific multiracial labels for themselves.

Stage 3: *Self-Acceptance and Assertion of an Interracial Identity*. Kich (1992) explained this stage as "a continued process of lifelong tasks, which seem to repeat at different levels of complexity during major crises or transitions throughout the life span." (p. 316). Biracial people develop a congruent self-definition valuing one's identity as something constructed out of the relationship between personal experience and social meanings of ethnic/racial group membership. Exploring one's biracial heritage/culture continues.

Pryor, Weinberg, and Williams's (1994) model of bisexual identity described four nonlinear stages:

Initial Confusion. At this stage, the person experiences periods of confusion, doubt, and struggle regarding her/his sexual identity before defining self as bisexual.

The sources of confusion:

- Having strong sexual feelings for both sexes is unsettling, disorienting, and frightening.
- Thinking one's strong feelings for, or sexual behavior with, the same sex means an end to her/his long standing heterosexuality.
- Attempting to categorize one's feelings for, and/or behaviors with, both sexes, yet not being able to do so. Unaware of term "bisexual".
- One's own homophobia adds to confusion.

Finding and Applying the Label. This stage is reached in various ways:

- Discovering that a category exists is a turning point in itself. It provides a means of making sense of one's long-standing feelings of both sexes.
- Discovering that one's first homo/heterosexual experience was coupled with recognition that sex is pleasurable with both females and males.
- Recognizing one's sexual feeling for both were simply

too strong to deny.

- Receiving encouragement and support from others.

Settling into the Identity.

- Becoming more self-accepting of one's bisexuality.

- Becoming less concerned with negative attitudes of others.

- Receiving continued support from friends, counselors, bisexual specific organizations, and through reading.

- Engaging self in a supportive social community.

Continued Uncertainty. Experiencing intermittent periods of doubt and uncertainty regarding one's sexual identity.

The reasons for this are:

- Lack of social validation and support (even after self-acceptance).

- Absence of bisexual role models, no real bisexual community, no public recognition of bisexuality.

- Pervasiveness of heterosexism and biphobia.

Summary

This research was undertaken to determine similarities between bisexual and biracial college students. Similar elements emerged when comparing the literature of these two populations of students. These similarities included: underrepresentation and denial of existence, having a need to be part of a community, ambiguous identities, and a need for understanding and acceptance from others.

Two identity models were used to compare emerging patterns as well. Similarities in the two identity models also included personal/social confusion that can lead to conflict dissonance, finding and applying self-labels, and working towards achieving assertive self-identity where seeing self as being both/and and not either/or.

Implications for Student Affairs

Gaining an awareness of biracial and bisexual college students' identity development could contribute to more effective student affairs practice. Going back to the questions raised at the beginning of this paper can provide direction and reflection for implications. For instance, how do we help students fully experience college life? How can we use theories and identity development models for understanding different types of college students? How can identifying similar patterns be of use in thinking about and understanding students as a whole?

First of all, an understanding of biracial and bisexual identity development should sensitize student affairs practitioners to the conflicting issues that could be occurring in the college students' lives. To be more effective, student affairs practitioners need to be sensitive and willing to acknowledge and adjust to students' situations.

Student affairs professionals should learn how to support biracial and bisexual students. Although one may not fully understand others, he or she can recognize and value others. When one truly listens to the experiences of college students, then student affairs professionals can adapt programs which might enrich and support their college experiences. Kich (1996) reveals the need to "dissect binary thinking" and by "combining voices" more will be heard. "Those who find the familiar ways of life comfortable and satisfying see no need for change and can only envision the breakdown of society. To those who find the familiar way of life oppressive, however, change is necessary and signals not the breakdown, but the evolution of society" (Rust, 1992, p. 300). Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) believe that building coalitions among diverse people is a way to face the challenges of oppression.

It's the life experiences of college students that need to be included in their own learning process. Rhoads (1995) suggests that improving campus climates require active and transformative, rather than merely reactive, efforts. Student affairs professionals should develop strategies for raising issues that bring underlying tensions to the surface. "This approach views potential conflict not as something to be avoided, but rather as an opportunity for growth" (Rhoads, p.73). Acting as a facilitator would allow a college student to understand and work through issues relating to his or her identity.

The student affairs professional also needs to understand the potentially changing development of college students. Rust (1992) notes that "change is often seen as threatening because it means the destruction of familiar ways of life" (p. 301). As a student affairs practitioner, one must make every effort to understand the complexity and changing nature of their roles and their relationships with college students.

In addition, student affairs practitioners need to be accepting and respectful of every individual. Student affairs professionals have a responsibility to their academic communities to encourage more just environments for all students. "Communities in which diversity serves as an organizing concept should be the goal (Rhoads, 1995, p.73). Tierney (1993) discussed the concept of "communities of difference":

It is curious, perhaps, that I am suggesting we build the idea of community around the concept of diversity, for communities generally suggest commonality. Such communities, however, have inevitably silenced those of us on the borders. Instead, we need to develop the notion of difference and engage in dialogues across border zones (p. 25).

Student affairs practitioners must also understand that they cannot limit themselves to one perspective or one developmental theory. With continued research, one may be able

to appreciate and realize the impact of “being in someone else’s shoes.” Stories and experiences can reveal a much more powerful impact and insight to the appreciation and understanding of our differences.

“Nurturance programming,” as described by Schreier (1995), which promotes a condition of allowing, accepting, and encouraging can be conducted through residence hall, staff educational in-services, administrative offices, campus organizations, fraternities and sororities, classes, orientation, or health services. Student affairs professionals can serve as credible role models challenging students’ knowledge and beliefs about the world. By challenging students’ personal attitudes, student affairs professionals can perhaps, over time, send a message about attitudes that may differ from others (Shreier, 1995).

Finally, it is a mission for student affairs professionals to develop and encourage the affirmation of all people. Could bringing biracial and bisexual students together be proposed for effective fulfillment of this goal? Through further investigation and research, a better understanding could bring about change for the betterment of all.

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